The dilemma of secrecy in the study of three ethnic groups from the South American Gran Chaco

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Abstract: From an epistemological perspective, ethics poses a problem that goes beyond the issue of the stakeholders' rationality or irrationality. Besides, it refers to the conceptual framework of knowledge, practices, and emotions allowed and forbidden within the group, as well as to their possible revelation to the researcher. This compels us to reconsider group secrets and their disclosure to the anthropologist. Undoubtedly, the resolution of this problem attempts to introduce a novel topic both concerning ethnographic fieldwork and anthropological reflection. Our examples are provided by the Wichi and Chorote Indians of the Argentine Chaco and by the Nivaclé of the Paraguayan Chaco. Secrets usually fall within the private sphere, whose meaning differs among these cultures: it may be based on a reasonable respect for intimacy, but also on the attribution of cosmological disorder that manifests the disintegration of the world. According to our experience, rubbish, body waste, corpses, or the violation of modesty as required by sexual relations attest to such disorder. Hence, all those topics associated either with Life or Death should occur not only in private but in a protected environment. We bring forward these issues by classifying secrecy into the following fields: 1) cognitive; 2) gender

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differences; 3) emotions; 4) offense; 5) guilt; 6) new forms of secrecy and disclosure. In this paper, the relevance of secrets is shown in unexpected situations arising from an interaction that takes place on the boundaries of standardised knowledge, and may contribute to the enhancement of anthropological knowledge while revealing unforeseen topics.

Keywords: ethnic secrets, anthropological reflection, forms of "secrecy" and disclosure, South American Chaco

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Le dilemme du secret dans l'étude de trois groupes ethniques du Gran Chaco Sud-américain

Résumé : Du point de vue épistémologique, l'éthique pose un problème qui va au-delà de la question de la rationalité ou l'irrationalité des acteurs. En outre, ce problème porte aussi bien sur le cadre conceptuel des connaissances, des pratiques et des émotions autorisées et interdites dans le groupe, que sur leur éventuelle révélation au chercheur. Cela nous oblige à reconsidérer les secrets du groupe et leur divulgation à l'anthropologue. Sans aucun doute, la solution de ce problème présente un sujet nouveau qui concerne à la fois le travail de terrain ethnographique que la réflexion anthropologique. Notre corpus sera constitué des Indiens Wichí et Chorote du Chaco argentin et des Nivaclé du Chaco paraguayen. Les secrets correspondent généralement à la sphère privée dont le sens diffère en fonction des cultures. La sphère privée peut être fondée sur un respect raisonnable de l'intimité, mais aussi sur l'attribution d'un désordre cosmologique qui exprime la désintégration du monde. Les ordures, les déchets du corps, les cadavres ou la violation de la pudeur suite à des relations sexuelles sont des éléments qui attestent ce désordre dans les groupes étudiés. Par conséquent, tous ces sujets associés soit à la vie, soit à la mort devraient se produire non seulement dans la sphère du privé, mais aussi dans un environnement protégé. Nous allons mettre en exergue ces problèmatiques à travers la catégorisation du secret en fonction du critère 1) cognitif, 2) de genre, 3) des émotions, 4) de l'offense, 5) de la culpabilité, 6) des nouvelles formes de secret et divulgation. La relevance des secrets sera montrée dans des situations imprévues résultant d'une interaction qui a lieu aux frontières de la connaissance standardisée et peut contribuer à l'amélioration de la connaissance anthropologique, tout en révélant de nouveaux thèmes.

Mots-clés: secrets ethniques, réflexion anthropologique, formes de « secrecy » et divulgation, Chaco Sud-américain

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After many years of conducting field research, we have been able to establish a good rapport that has facilitated our access to previously veiled areas, namely, secrecy. In this case, we will focus on the agreed aspects of the meaning of "secrecy", that is, those features that a society intentionally keeps from outsiders and that are intimately linked to their specific privacy modes, to the spheres of intimacy and of what has not yet been confided to us. This meaning is inspired on the related definition of "secrecy" which, according to Bok (1989, p. 5-7), refers to "intentional concealment". This secrecy does not involve a moral judgement but would be associated with guilt, threat, or the notion of respect in certain societies.

We do not intend to be so naïve as to ignore the asymmetry inherent in our interactions and, basically, in the relevant types of morality. Avoiding a candid relativist approach, we understand that any human group, whether spontaneously or not, whether consciously or unconsciously, follows certain social imperatives, among which we will particularly consider ethics and morality. Ethics expresses the set of archetypes and stereotypes that social mandates, custom, or socialisation convey across all group members, while morality dictates the ideal group-driven models to the individual, thus conferring various nuances to the concepts of good and bad or of right and wrong. Both imperatives are, at least in part, modes of social control (Poirier, 1968, p. 1092), concurrently with the law as understood by Marcel Mauss under the category of "moral phenomena". More recently, "morality" has seen a boom in Anglo-Saxon literature, especially when explaining the fundamentals of "conviviality" and of "living well" among different Amazonian and Chaco peoples (Overing, Passes, 2000, p. XIII).

From an epistemological perspective, we may wonder whether ethics, like belief, poses a problem that not only relates to the issue of the stakeholders' rationality or irrationality but also to the conceptual framework of anthropological knowledge. The topics in question will be addressed from a perspective that takes into account societies and their secrets, as well as the possibility of our access to some of those secrets, which usually happens when the cultural barriers hindering a fluid interaction with our interlocutors are occasionally lifted.

Specifically, in the course of our relationship with the Wichí, Chorote, and Nivaclé of the South American Gran Chaco, punctuated by rights and wrongs, we have learnt to overcome some serious communication problems. As their confidence, spontaneity, and affection increased, they confided some secrets to us regarding age or gender, among others. Thus, we have been able to expand our knowledge on practices, representations, and emotions seen as ethically correct. In this sense, as Giobellina Brumana (2005, p. 256) argues, *"A secret requires from the person who does not possess it but wants to learn it, who takes the secret very seriously but is excluded from it, either to overcome the barriers standing in the way or to dodge them."* . The last attitudes have characterised certain predatory practices of ethnography, which were fortunately discontinued decades ago with the fall of colonialism. Marcel Griaule, the ethnographer who studied the Dogon secrets and

became the focus of much controversy, was *"Hailed as a hero of French Africanist ethnography, with a prodigious output and prestigious 'school', and assailed as an anti-hero whose sympathy for Africa masked deeper forms of colonial violence; Griaule embodies the best and the worst of our disciplinary history"* (Apter, 2005, p. 95).

Indeed, the disciplinary history of "intentional concealment", hereinafter called "secrecy"[1], has been centred on the discussion of initiation rites, secret societies, shamanism, and witchcraft in different native peoples. Special emphasis has been given to the experience of sacredness and power, of what is forbidden, or to the value of symbols. Among the main authors discussing the topic are Mircea Eliade, Mary Douglas, Victor Turner, Edgardo J. Cordeu.

As far as the methodology of this paper is concerned, certain sensitive issues force anonymity so that surnames and some place names have been replaced. Notwithstanding this, our fieldwork, understood as a research practice founded on interactive depth and spatialised difference (Clifford, 1999, p. 85), should be very careful and specific regarding ethnic composition, environments, and communication situations.

Guadalupe Barúa stayed for long periods at the Wichí village of Tres Pozos since 1990 to 2010 with an average of one month per year, except in 1994 where she stayed the entire year. Alejandra Siffredi engaged in extensive field research with the Chorote of the Middle Pilcomayo from the 1970s onwards. Beginning the 1980s she turned her attention to the Nivaclé of the Paraguayan Chaco, particularly those dwelling in the Catholic multiethnic mission of Santa Teresita, inhabited by Nivaclé, Chiriguano, and Tapiete aborigines in separate neighbourhoods, pursuing intensive study of Nivaclé culture and cosmology. The average period in the field was of one month per year.

These are, indeed, very different contexts, both from a historical and spatial viewpoint. Unlike the Nivaclé and Chorote who display an amplified form of sociability giving preference to balanced exchange rules, the Wichí exhibit a kind of sociability that is mostly confined to the domestic group, which is consistent with their acceptance of restricted exchange rules. Thus, and in connection with the types of body control, concealment, modesty, and secrecy regarding body secretions are emphasised in closely related people, and also in the gestures made in everyday conversation. Normally, conversations are held in a low voice; words are exchanged in a subdued manner between emitter and receptor, avoiding being overheard by outsiders, which makes these people even more addicted to secrecy as any conversation may be considered to be "private". This contrasts with the other two societies where the body is a means of communication, and more open and

[1] According to Bok's definition, *"it refers to the resulting concealment. It also denotes the methods used to conceal, such as codes or disguises or camouflage, and the practices of concealment"* (1989, p. 6).

spontaneous communication is valued. Notwithstanding this, the above three societies (along with other Chaco and Amazonian groups) see body secretions inherent to women's fertility (menstrual or puerperal blood) as impure and polluting, and as the source of personal, group, and cosmological misfortune. Hence, these secretions are surrounded by a series of prohibitions concerning food, activities, and communication. Regarded as "women's secrets", the Nivaclé men pretend to be unaware of them, asserting that if they told such secrets they would be merely gossiping about trivial and inconsistent things. Finally, there are differences in the way of conceiving cosmologies that are somewhat similar in content - the Wichí are close to Mary Douglas' groundbreaking model (1973) where body holes and secretions are seen as "dirt" and are associated with the world's own pollution. Therefore, they yearn for mythical times when people's bodies were "closed" and were hence seen as invulnerable (*wichí tolahlí,* Dasso, 1999, p. 223), as compared to the Nivaclé and Chorote for whom this closeness caused suffocation and anguish (Siffredi, 1989, p. 530).

In sum, these characteristics have conditioned our work on account of the varying scope and nature of secrecy and revelation, where loyalty to what has been confided to us is not negotiable among the Wichí, while for the Nivaclé and Chorote, disclosing certain secrets is a personal choice.

We will look into these issues by classifying secrecy based on the following criteria; 1) cognitive; 2) gender differences; 3) the burst of emotions; 4) the perception of unwanted offensive actions; 5) the attribution of guilt and the ensuing conflict; 6) new forms of "secrecy" or the disclosure of esoteric knowledge. We will discuss these categories in connection with the groups we have studied, namely, the Wichí, Nivaclé, and Chorote of the South American Gran Chaco.

It is not our intention that the chosen criteria should constrain the potential range of secrecy-related phenomena. Ethically, our hands are tied in all cases because, should we reveal their most private secrets, we would hardly be able to keep interacting with them or with any other member of their society. This situation is even worse among the Wichí. On some occasions, we may be faced with a huge ethical dilemma between our good relationship with the group (which confers reliability to our research) and the breach of any of those secrets for the benefit of one or more members, at the expense of giving up our work.

Our hypothesis on the relevance of secret and secrecy attempts to demonstrate how unexpected situations arising from an interaction that takes place on the boundaries of habitual and standardised knowledge may contribute to the enhancement of anthropological knowledge and may disclose unforeseen topics.

1. Cognitive Orientations of Secrecy

We may be informed of a fact that has so far been unknown to one or several groups of the same culture and which could contribute to our investigation, but which cannot be disclosed as expressly requested by our interlocutors. This control over secrecy helps safeguard key aspects of personal and group identity (Bok, 1989, p. 42), as demonstrated by the obligations and commitments lying at the core of different initiation rites throughout the Nivaclé life cycle. The sequence of these rites - couvade, pubertal initiations, childbirth, adulthood, death, and mourning (Siffredi, 1993/94, p. 275-280) - includes mysterious and sometimes threatening aspects, so that the boundaries of the human condition become uncertain, thus enhancing individual vulnerability and the need for secrecy (Bok, 1989, p. 21-22).

In our example, knowledge was revealed in a series of interviews and observations along the years, and we managed to get the full picture only at the end. In pubertal initiations, recruits are gifted with the mastery of thunderbirds. Their names are considered such an inviolable secret that the aborigines firmly declined to confide it to us. Notwithstanding this, men and women alike agree that it is worth having an indulgent bird, provided that both keep its identity, songs, and habitat secret. Moreover, the Nivaclé women used a concealment tactic with us stating that secret birds were simply known as "*ajwena*", a bird's generic lexeme in Chorote (Drayson, 2009, p. 93), i.e. in an akin language. Although we realised they were hiding information, we intentionally dodged the issue as we knew we were under continuous scrutiny. This comes to show that, despite our acquaintance, the barriers of secrecy rise up to a certain point, and that the women had to resort to their inventiveness for concealment.

The focus of attention lies in the dramatic scene of female initiation when the initiand runs around in circles supported by two masked men who, under an oppressive midday sun, take turns until the candidate faints. In such a state, an old woman who has acted as her mistress teaches her one or more songs from the *Fanjás*, the spirits of waterbirds that rule over atmospheric and climatic phenomena, and are better known in the discipline as "thunderbirds". These songs are incorporated to the person's inner principles as another spiritual component essential to life (self, shadow, support, among others). In order to establish a communicative relationship with the *Fanjás*, the initiated women resort to songs that reproduce the voice of birds without using any words. Taking into account the protective function vis-à-vis the female initiand, we have proposed the notion of personal spirits or, more specifically, of song spirits (Siffredi, 2009, p. 235). Indeed, these comfort the singer in delicate situations, such as the threat of food scarcity due to the delayed ripening of wild fruits, especially the *algarroba* (*Prosopis alba*), and may provide rain to accelerate maturation. Furthermore, when the singer is sad or distressed, these song spirits help placate such feelings. The rattle made of *corzuela* deer

hooves or even metal lids is an exclusively women's instrument used to accompany songs. Both these and the names of the birds they represent are considered "secret"[2]. Also, singing them in inappropriate situations, i.e. before outsiders, may have risky consequences, both at a cosmological and personal level. These consequences were insistently underlined by our confidante, the outgoing and unruly female shaman Ju, in front of other old initiated women, while she blamed the missionaries for refusing to baptise her arguing that she still kept her secret song spirits. Despite her scepticism regarding any possible consequences, on account of which Ju insisted on chanting some of her secret songs, we noted that she sang with a blank stare, as if she were absent from her own dwelling. At the same time, she expressed deep sorrow and her crying reached a crescendo. In our opinion, her performance was similar to mournful funeral wailing. Once recovered, the old woman said that, as she chanted, she felt a stabbing throat pain and that her groans were caused by a vision of her late mistress that made her sad. *"I felt like my throat was closing up and I almost choked…"*

Despite the confidence gained over time and shown in the above performance, she flatly refused to utter the names of her invisible birds, and merely commented with a hint of sarcasm that such birds were not very powerful as they prevented her from taking over a leading role in the shamanic séances. She could only play the role of assistant to the male elders who usually work in a hierarchy-based team depending on the scope of their own powers. In a rather unobtrusive manner, which was unusual for her, she confessed that she observed the dietary restrictions imposed by her secret birds under threat of leaving her. If they did so, she would become exposed to severe diseases, which is a socially agreed belief in situations of spiritual and, to a lesser extent, physical vulnerability. Dietary restrictions applied to oranges, tinned tomatoes, and fresh onions (all products introduced by the Whites), to which she attributed "a bad smell".

However, old Ma, a charming, smart, and devote convert, admitted breaking the taboos imposed by her secret birds at least once. We used to visit our close friend in her isolated home driven by a mutual albeit unspoken trust. Her assumed identity, whether nativist or catholic, reaffirms her lack of interest in contradictions; a powerful/insignificant female shaman, a devoted convert, and an experienced dancer. Forever unruly, she insisted that she kept the experience of her initiation (at the age of seven or eight) as a secret due to the fear still caused by its mere recollection. Her initiation was undoubtedly unusual, more similar in content to male initiation, known as *chijanjatiyán*[3], than to female initiation. However, she

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[2] In the vernacular, one of the meanings of the lexeme *vaata.ya* or "secret" connotes an unwillingness to reveal a confidential situation.

[3] Derived from the word rattle (*jajanjatí*), an instrument accompanied by songs, dances, and secrets during male initiation rituals. At present, it is only the male shamans who continue to use the rattle or maraca.

stated that, according to the officiating shamans, that type of ritual was performed by the forebears for prepubescent boys and girls. Several shamans, willing to put into practice the coercive aspects involved in these rituals, accepted the inclusion of a girl, under pressure from her mother and despite her father's disagreement, based on the assumption that a girl would violate the resulting secret obligations (activity and dietary restrictions). She had to stay awake during two days and two nights, in silence and fasting, surrounded by the officiating shamans who forced her to dance and jump continuously. Before fainting from exhaustion, she was able to make out the songs by the officiating shamans, but while unconscious she was only vaguely aware of a variety of songs by waterbirds, coming from the depths of the Earth. She pointed out that they could have taught her beneficial and harmful songs for the people and their environment, since at her age she could not tell the difference between them. She was referring to the inherent powers of the songs of the *Fanjás isis* and *Fanjás ni isá*, favourable and harmful, respectively. Paraphrasing Bok (1989, p. 54), we should wonder whether *"...it is not the coercion, the disorientation, and the assault on judgment, when they occur* [as in this situation], *that are objectionable, regardless of the secrecy that shrouds them?*"

Once a teenager, Ma knew that she had been taught only the songs of benevolent thunderbirds, the rain-givers, but not of those producing roar and lightning (Siffredi, 2009, p. 231). It is worth noting the influence of missionisation as Ma insisted that, in reply to the frequent inquiries by a well-known linguist and priest (who was convinced that she was hiding her secret powers from him), she always claimed to have beneficial powers coming from non-aggressive waterbirds. In our presence, she shared numerous demonstrations of faith; prayers and dreams about Jesus Christ, but she refrained from revealing her secret powers. Two years later, she confirmed her initiation testimony. Then, on occasion of the International Aboriginal Day on 19th April 1987, celebrated at the Nivaclé House, a revival of the former men's lodge, Ma mesmerized her audience with a remake of the feminine rattle dance, which in the past was performed by the old women during female initiation. Some youngsters gave her two glasses of wine that made her dizzy "because her secret bird did not like the smell of alcohol" and so took revenge by bringing continuous rain and floods for three days. Playing the fool, she said she had heard people complaining and screaming with fear in view of such calamity. Seeing this, Ma came out of her house and yelled at her bird to placate the rain. The rain stopped after the bird had warned Ma not to drink wine and not to insult it again by singing its song before outsiders. Our observations and Ma's comments point to an insurmountable concealment of secrecy, which provides just a few clues - *"the bird I know is all white, with soft feathers like sheep wool, and when it flaps its wings a little, it gets cloudy or there is a crack of thunder. If it flaps its wings more vigorously, it lights up the entire earth."* Emphatically, Ma declared to us; *"The youngsters will never get to know me well. I always sit by the fire as a plain old woman."* However, on many occasions we heard people say (especially the young people) that Ma had a

huge power, greater than her husband of the same trade, which made her a true prophetess.

In sum, none of our eight initiated female interlocutors uttered the name of their protecting birds and only referred to them as *ajwena*, which they said was the generic name for "bird", an invented tactic to safeguard the ethics of secrecy, as already mentioned.

A second Nivaclé example relates to the appreciation of the Chaco War (1932-35), which is surrounded by secrecy especially regarding their relations with the Bolivian people. Although very few Nivaclé speak their mind blaming the Bolivian army for all kinds of ill treatment (torture, flaying, execution by firing squad), any reference to the previous coexistence with those who became the enemies of the Paraguayan people is considered to be a secret. The latter were the winners of the Chaco War and hence the "masters" of today's native populations in the region. The ensuing secrecy stems from privacy, understood, according to Bok's definition (1989, p. 10-11), as the condition of being protected from unwanted access by others (in this case, the anthropologists) to sensitive information requiring security.

Therefore, the confidential remark of an old man (*To*) is of great interest. He was fearful and had strong misgivings about the revenge effects arising from the disclosure of such secret, which he compared (but not very convincingly) to past interethnic hostilities in search of scalps. Although morally justified from a native and non-native perspective, the above reprisals decreased as the Chaco War came to an end. Notwithstanding this, the recollection of how scalps were obtained, their preparation, and other related rituals encourage and dignify the Nivaclé, while any information about their living conditions with the Bolivian people is kept as a State secret. Our interlocutor had worked for the Paraguayan military for over two decades. He confessed to us that during his temporary stay in *Maavash*, an emblematic village in Nivaclé history, the Bolivians, following the traces of numerous goat and sheep in the hands of the Nivaclé, had slaughtered all the animals without encountering any resistance from them for fear of subsequent reprisals. Thus, it was the Nivaclé who supplied meat to the Bolivians during the war. It was a paradoxical situation that years later would be corroborated by archival records; so much so that it was even suggested that the trials and tribulations of that war had been favoured by the fact that troops, forts, and settlers (first Bolivian and then Paraguayan) were juxtaposed with the Nivaclé territorial organisation, and also benefitted from their labour, foodstuffs, and women (Richard, 2007, p. 222-229).

Unlike the recollection of interethnic scalp hunting expeditions, supported by a revenge that was seen as morally just insofar as it sought to balance intergroup social relations, we may wonder whether hiding events from such a harsh war between nations is related to the need to avoid disrupting social harmony, now with the Paraguayan people, however tough it may be.

In the Wichí example, anything related to body secretions, either from animals or humans, such as faeces, urine, sweat, farts, semen, blood, or bad body odour produced by glands (see Overing, 2006, p. 9-32) are considered polluting and dangerous and are invisibilised as best as possible. Bodily secretions and excretions are hidden or become manifest in private. The same applies to the disposal of rubbish. When it was a matter of hunting, fishing, and gathering, rubbish was not an issue. At present, with the introduction of items and packaging from the western world, foodstuffs, clothes, etc., they recycle as much as they can, and the rest is buried. The emissions of bodily secretions as well as detritus (the decomposing organic material of human, animal, and vegetable origin) are potentially poisonous and may cause diseases, even more so if it relates to toxic materials introduced by us. On one occasion, we took an insect killer and, when we had to dispose of it, the youngsters hanged it as high as possible up a tree in the forest, away from the domestic domain. In this case, it could not be buried because being so toxic it would poison the soil. Furthermore, body wastes and rubbish are also regarded as polluting and therefore disease-causing agents.

As Bok (1989, p. 7) points out, secrets form a family of related meanings: *"sacred, intimate, private, unspoken, silent, prohibited, shameful, stealthy or deceitful"*. Thus, the private remains hidden from outsiders, not only physically but also as regards communication. In the Wichí case, this surrounding personal space comprises other attributes that highlight their humanity, such as their personal names (what they consider to be their real names) which are kept under the strictest secrecy (Barúa, 2001, p. 15 - 47).

Moreover, there are different ways of protecting childbirth, sexual intimacy, death, or of making the burial place invisible. We saw how a dead person was placed in a basket-like structure made out of branches and lowered into a hole dug in the forest, only in the presence of the closest male relatives (the rest of us were able to watch the scene from a distance) and in the deepest silence. The "grave" usually lacks any identification. Thus, in the near future, the place will be covered by the forest and will no longer be identified. In fact, the Wichí see the world as a huge graveyard.

Finally, the concealment of physiological activities, the ritualised management of menstrual blood, the treatment of rubbish, the quick evanescence of corpses, they all underline the idea of privacy and guarantee the preservation of living beings.

However, even if polluting things are poisonous, they cannot be avoided. The Wichí culture transforms the "necessary poisons" into harmless and even useful things. In this way, the proper management of "poison" helps balance fertility and sterility and turn a poisonous plant edible and healthy, so much so that the "medicine or poison" category fluctuates in the same way as the power to create and destroy. Indeed, they use the same word *kach'yá* to refer to medicine and poison (Barúa, 1992, p. 23).

2. Gender Differences regarding Secrecy

This subject matter was examined in great detail in connection with the Nivaclé and their female initiation rituals when songs are transferred through the thunderbirds (Siffredi, 2009. p. 229 - 46). As regards the Wichí, we would like to comment on an event we witnessed and which portrays the problem of secrecy for the researcher's work. Every now and then we went out gathering in the forest with a group of women. In addition to being a pleasant activity, it was a way of building friendships, listening to confessions, and learning about the good and bad things that were happening to their relatives, as well as a form of checking their knowledge of plants that had already been seriously investigated by the ethnobotanists working with the Wichí. But, until then, the botanists had been men and there was certain knowledge that was banned from them on account of their gender.

On one of these gathering excursions, the women showed us (with the warning that we should not make it public) a very strange plant they utilised to induce abortion. We only learnt that its effectiveness depends on the men not knowing of its existence, and that it could be used just once throughout a woman's fertility cycle; otherwise, it would be very dangerous.

It would be impossible for us to identify the plant as we could not get near it to pick a sample or at least jot down its characteristics on our field notebook. So, we can merely recall the use attributed to the plant and leave future researchers to look into the question - women point out an abortive plant with very special properties. As the forest is unfortunately disappearing at a fast pace, it is likely that secrets of this kind will vanish with it.

3. The Burst of Emotions related to Secrecy

Frequently, when a member of one of these ethnic groups is experiencing serious social and emotional problems (sometimes a matter of life and death), which clash with social standards, he/she confides to us a secret that cannot or will not be revealed to anyone in his/her community so as to alleviate his/her distress.

In the Nivaclé community of Santa Teresita, in 1990, we received very sad news that our mentor and friend *As* had died. He was also a high-ranking shaman who enjoyed wide renown and was required beyond the frontiers of Paraguay, in Brazil and Argentina for the effectiveness of his healing[4]. We were surprised at the continuous concealment of any expression of grief, so that we headed for As' hut only to find that it had been burnt down, an old funeral practice that has now fallen

[4] The case of As is very common among natives today. As the scope of action of neo-shamans expands, they are acknowledged for their specific experience and their stories of residence and journeys (Clifford, 1999, p. 79).

into disuse. His family had moved first to another area in the village and finally to the Mennonite Colonies, because after As' death they felt excluded from social relations. Also, we heard some gossip[5] that the deceased's daughter had cunningly poached another woman's husband and had thus provoked the typical fights between women.

However, *Jo*, the grandson of the previous great shaman (*Nujaché*), told us that As had dodged his own death attributed to the revenge of an opposing shaman who lived in the Mennonite Colonies, and had redirected it to four old men in his village. According to Jo, a reliable interlocutor, the incident of those four deaths, along with As' awareness of his inevitable forthcoming demise, had been confided to him by As himself, strongly urging him to keep the secret from other people, including their kindred. In order to prove the truth of this assertion, he commented that the night of his death very loud explosions were heard amidst an unusual glow - the gourd in which he kept his *chicha* (a drink made from fermented fruit, usually from *Prosopis alba*) had burst together with his rattle, an emblematic shamanic instrument containing his helping spirits under the shape of seeds, which are invoked while singing specific songs and drinking the beer. By recalling the events with an undeniable degree of subjectivity, Jo was concealing an ambiguous emotional state, which fluctuated between denial and the sorrow provoked by the attenuation of a very close affective bond with his late mentor, a formerly preferential relationship between the old and the young. As Jo managed to confide to us (not incidentally outsiders) a secret that was tough to endure alone, we realised that his initial bewilderment was gradually subduing. In sum, the burst of emotions experienced by Jo when revealing his secret contrasted with other Nivaclé's silence or gossip.

In the Wichí case, banned marriages may result in suicide or infanticide, or at least nowadays in an attempt to do so. Among them, the burst of emotions is usually avoided. At times, extremely serious social and emotional problems may lead to the death of the afflicted person. This usually happens when the victim's own wishes are against those of his/her family. In such cases, we have learnt about such distress precisely on account of our status as outsiders.

The issue here is that we share their sufferings, listen to them, try to comfort them somehow, but are forbidden to talk about it, even if the person who has confided in us is severely affected. Keeping these types of secrets is an ethical burden, as sometimes we might have a solution to their pain but we would be literally attempting against the "living well" of the entire community.

Some time ago we mentioned an example of this kind in a concealed way on account of its secrecy (Barúa, 1998, p. 111): a young couple in love was separated

[5] An informal way of secrecy-related personal communication about people who are absent (Bok, 1989, p. 91).

by their respective families. Each one was married to another person. The first one to approach us was the young man who, during a walk in the forest, told us about his grief, which was aggravated by the fact that he ignored why, all of a sudden, his lover did not love him any more. Not only did she not speak to him, but she did not even look at him. He in vain asked her for an explanation; she just avoided him without saying a word. The fact of not understanding the reason for her behaviour increased his grief. On another occasion, it was her who started to tell us what had happened to their relationship. The problem was an old-time animosity between the girl's mother and the young man's family, which had been expressed in the past with witchcraft and counter-witchcraft. At the time, these actions led to the death of a child in the young man's family, who had blamed the girl as the secret bearer of her mother's "venom". They forbade her to have any contact with her lover; she should not only refuse to speak to him but also to look at him, so that he would never know the reason for their separation. At times we have wondered whether these confessions were aimed at making the other person know what he/she ignored and thus alleviate his/her uncertainty and let him/her know that, despite the impossibility of being together, they would always love each other. The young man got ill and sank into deep anxiety. He became so depressed that he could hardly speak and was at a high risk of death.

In this case, we would not refer to a burst of emotions but rather to an implosion within the person. These states affecting the Wichí at some point in life for some reason or other resemble what Peter Gow defines for Piro people as "helpless"; to grieve, to be sad, to suffer , to be cute, to be cuddly… their aloneness, their singularity as humans (Gow, 2000, p. 47). Thus, his health and contentment was in our hands. At this stage of our considerations, we think that her confession had that purpose in mind. But helping the young man by revealing what she had explained to us (as she was forbidden to communicate with him directly) meant losing the community's trust. In addition, we were not sure whether she really wanted us to disclose the cause of separation to her lover and that she still loved him, or whether such confession only allowed her to overcome her distress and find some degree of resignation regarding her earlier suicidal thoughts, which she had also confessed. We will never know it; but if the young man had died, our secret would have become an unbearable burden to us. Fortunately, he gradually got better and resigned himself with time.

4. Unwanted Disclosure of Secrets as an Offensive Action

This usually happens when we unwillingly disclose a secret by encouraging stereotypes that are seen as offensive. Again, in our example, privacy is related to secrecy because our Nivaclé interlocutors considered that they became vulnerable when members of other ethnic groups interfered with our work because an expression of their identity would become a target of mockery.

We were reviewing a genealogy of the Nivaclé community of Santa Teresita with two Nivaclé men when a Guarani-speaking Chiriguano teacher joined us. It should be noted that the Nivaclé understand Guaraní and many of them speak the language, while the Chiriguano cannot understand a word of Nivaclé. The anthropologist, feeling overjoyed that she had seen the correspondence between the red or black colours used in body-painting by two subgroups and the identical hues in the genealogical components, made the mistake of asking her interlocutors in Nivaclé language whether the persons tinted in red (in the genealogy) were *nichaclavot* (the name of a mythical bird and of one of the subgroups) and whether those in black were *q'ustaj* (mockingbird, *Mimus saturninus*, the name of the other subgroup). Although incomprehensible for the teacher, the issue caused a double misunderstanding; on the one hand, an implicit misunderstanding between the two Nivaclé and the teacher. On the other hand, a misunderstanding between the two Nivaclé and the anthropologist, accused of disclosing a secret in the presence of a Chiriguano, an outsider who in fact should not have been there. Owing to this double misinterpretation, a tense and long silence fell on the two Nivaclé. We felt uneasy and took the hint, and asked the teacher to leave. Notwithstanding this, the tension was not reduced. Our interlocutors remained stubborn, undaunted, and without speaking a word to us. After our apologies and their threats to withdraw cooperation, we were able to clear up the meaning they gave to the secret in question: they thought that the Chiriguano, on account of his assumed higher rank (also encouraged by the missionaries) regarding the Nivaclé, would divulge their nearly animal (bird) identity. In other words, a stereotype that was built vis-à-vis the Other, albeit in this situation it seemed objectively illogical. Finally, by resorting to the argument of linguistic differences we were able to make up for the "affront" and, more importantly, to articulate a cultural taxonomy accounting for key symbolic parameters in Nivaclé cosmology, ranging from organic processes to temperamental, intellectual, and cognitive traits (Siffredi, 1984, p. 214-215).

The Wichí expected us to behave similarly to what they consider "human" and which is manifested, for instance, in preventing overt violence. Also, it is materialised in Wichí etiquette by speaking in a subdued tone, avoiding being insistent or invasive, and abstaining from sudden changes. We always try to behave accordingly but at times we get distracted and they immediately become defensive and start to distrust our "semi-humanity". Thus, without realising, we found ourselves on the dangerous threshold beyond which lie the harmful beings. It should be borne in mind that all our actions and words are thoroughly observed and judged as they are constantly deciding to what category of beings we belong. Sometimes we even forget what things we can or cannot do, and on other occasions we are not careful enough to decide when we should or should not pretend "not to see" or "not to hear". This becomes evident when they find us guilty of situations that were quite far from our reciprocity horizon, so much so that we did not even understand that they were demanding something from us. This topic will be further discussed below.

5. Confessions of Secrets and the Emergence of Guilt

We distinguish between two forms of guilt – that which is self-imposed by the natives and that which the natives impose on us as "outsiders".

5.1. *Self-imposed Guilt*

Hounded by a mistake he had to conceal even from his own family, Jo, a young Nivaclé progenitor, revealed that on one occasion his one-year-old daughter suffered from continuous vomiting, which three shamans, who were already deceased, had attributed to the fact that evil plant spirits known as *vatlhujkí* had stolen her soul. After diagnosis, the shamans set out on a long "journey" to the north until they found her soul lying underneath a plant. They managed to recover her soul because neither the plant leaves nor its fruit (both very prickly) had fallen on the little girl's head. Once the soul was returned to her body, the sick girl began to feel better on the following day. Deeply dismayed by the long wait for the shamans' return (their ecstatic journey had lasted nearly seven hours), Jo hinted that he felt guilty for his little daughter's illness because, while being drunk, he had offended a shaman who, in reprisal, had stolen the child's soul. He shed light on his analysis by commenting that *"you only acknowledge your own guilt when punishment befalls others, which should not be disclosed to third persons other than those present* [the healing shamans and the audience], *precisely to avoid reprisals that might harm them"*.

Also among the Wichí, any offence to shamans usually results in illness and even death, unless the harm entailed by their revenge is thwarted by another shaman. At times, the offence is associated with a shaman who is despised because a woman he had unilaterally chosen did not feel the same about him (unlike ordinary people, shamans may skip social conventions out of the fear caused by their power). In the example given by one of our female interlocutors, an old shaman had chosen her as his wife. She was very young and did not like him. Her family reminded her of several young girls who had rejected other shamans in the past. In reprisal, the shamans had not only caused the girls to die but also their families. Although these risks are also implied in normal alliances, when young people disobey their families and pair up with a disapproved-of person or with someone who belongs to previously antagonistic families, evil acts occur in the form of witchcraft and counter-witchcraft among enemies that materialise in unfortunate "accidents" or "illnesses". Finally, the death of an affine results in the breaking up of the alliance (Barúa, 1998, p. 113).

5.2. *The Guilt within Us, anthropologists*

Often times, what aborigines expect from anthropologists and from what we can and cannot do is too far from reality. When they require something from us that we

cannot provide, they usually conclude that it is due to unwillingness and not because it is utterly impossible. In some cases, this may also lead them to stop any further communication with us. This happened to us in two very striking situations involving Wichí. First, a friend told us that he was experiencing deep pain in his life. One of his sisters had married a white Evangelical pastor. As soon as they got married, they went to live to another province where there are no aboriginal communities. And he never heard from her again. Naturally, he commented this while concealing his uneasiness. But he showed us a blurred photograph and told us her name and the pastor's first name, as he had no other information. He presumed that we would be able to find his sister, as if we belonged to a small community like theirs where everybody knows each other. That was his implicit request. We asked him to provide further details but he had none. We imagined that he was sharing his distress with us, but we did not assign any other intention. For us, it was out of the question that we might not be able to find his sister with that description alone. He assumed that we were saying no to his "request". We did not understand what was going on until our next fieldwork trip, when he appeared reluctant to talk. We tried to explain to him that we were unable to meet his request.

However, the last straw that put an end to our relationship –and to our rapport with his wife and sisters- is related to another circumstance. He told us that all the shamans in the community had died and that they needed cebil (*Anadenanthera colubrina*), a hallucinogenic plant whose seeds are crushed and then inhaled or smoked, and which is critical for the collective ceremonies performed by the shamans in the area. The plant is not grown in the Western Chaco region and it has to be collected farther away, in the Eastern Andean piedmont. It is generally obtained through exchange with Andean ethnic groups or through relatives that supply seeds to the shamans (see Dasso, Barúa, 2006, p. 228-229). He was then asking us to provide some seeds. We did not realise it was a "demand", a "necessary reward" for the information they had given us. We endeavoured to obtain them by asking some colleagues that have access to the area where cebil is grown but with no luck. We wrongly thought that, like in the case of his sister's whereabouts, we could try and do our best. We did not understand that they were asking us for a compulsory recompense. And in their eyes we were guilty because the "request" (an emphatic demand expressed as a comment) had not been duly met. Since then, our friendship dissolved.

6. New Forms of Secrecy and the Disclosure of Esoteric Knowledge

In his interesting rethinking of Marcel Griaule's discussion of Dogon esoterica, Andrew Apter (2005, p. 96) has postulated the unstableness and contradiction of some topics related to secrecy, which requires a more socially dynamic approach. According to the author, the transformation of knowledge of what is secret and what is revealed is context-specific; and he warns us about the risks of considering it fixed and timeless. In doing so the social scientist would be losing historical perspective.

These issues are illustrated by the Chorote, for whom, just like for their Nivaclé neighbours, some plant-spirits are the source of severe illnesses. It is forbidden to speak in public about the regulatory agents of those plants, which usually act as shamanic assistants and should be called Mothers. Secrecy attains its maximum level in the case of very prickly vegetables with sharp-edged leaves, whose name contains the lexeme *tséjmataki*. It is striking to note that they currently identify these plants and their morphological characteristics very accurately, but they absolutely refuse to provide any information on said lexeme, which is considered "inviolable" insofar as it is related to the personification of evil and all that is horrific, undoubtedly exacerbated by missionisation (Gustavo Scarpa, personal communication). However, in the 1970s, evil hints were already present in the traits of *Tséjmataki*; several references were made to this mythical ogress, which was the prototype of cannibalism and responsible for a pathogenic condition. Unless reverted by specific shamanic healing aimed at de-animalising the patient, such condition ended in an animalisation that consisted in the radical metamorphosis in a jaguar-like spirit (Siffredi, 2005, p. 198-203). In other words, the effects of this pathogen state upon the victim were related to predation, conceived as a component of the predator's identity (Descola, 2001, p. 110).

From a perspective more in keeping with the topic of this paper, the above examples are of interest to the extent that they show the variability of secrecy, which is subject to historical changes like other cultural phenomena. If in the 1970s communication restrictions could be overcome regarding the multiple manifestations of *Tséjmataki;* at present the researcher is faced with an insurmountable wall or at most with unequivocal recommendations to contact other communities (implicitly considered "pagan") to find out about such topics.

However, today's secret may be revealed, at least in part, resorting to testimonies from the 1970s without over-interpreting them. The meaning of *tséjmataki* present in the name of some prickly plants (usually *Bromelia spp*.) is elicited by referring to Chorote climatology, characterised by a dry season and a wet season. Shamans claim that it is during the dry season that the ogress builds her nest of burning bromeliad in the middle of the sky, giving off scorching heat that prevents the arrival of thunderbirds (waterbirds). These birds are responsible for the change of season, which is related to "living well", as they bring rain and human, animal and plant fertility. The methodological relevance of overcoming a communication barrier should be underlined, as it helps clarify new secrets that are currently inaccessible in Chorote history.

In the Wichí case, we have at times benefitted from the disclosure of a secret. This normally happens when a traditional practice is no longer in force. However, in our case, we were involved in a very interesting situation - it was not us who approached them to gain access to their knowledge (and transmit our knowledge if they asked for it), but in this specific example a couple of members of the community came up to us to reveal their family's secret knowledge and requested to

have it divulged. They did not act of their own free will but on account of a promise made to their dead father, a shaman who had asked them to reveal some secrets, *"so that they did not get lost in the world"*. Therefore, we should admit that in our case part of the work is based on disclosure information, for instance, the personal names related to the plant world[6], the Wichí women's bird songs (Barúa, 2013, p. 213-229), the enumeration of the shaman's "helping spirits", or the identification of "poisonous kindred" (Barúa, 1998, p. 111). However, this identification is made amongst close relatives that keep a harmonious relationship. Those individuals suspected of witchcraft are hidden to avoid tension.

Among the Wichí, the "kin" category is not limited to certain human beings but also includes some plants considered to be ruled by a similar kin relations system. This category is exchangeable on some ceremonial occasions or through personal names, a very traditional device in the past which is now tending to disappear among the new generations. In this sense, the "secret shared with an outsider" not only helps keep alive the memory of the most precious traditions but also expresses a hope of revitalisation, namely, through us the new generations will become acquainted with things they ignore or that are forbidden to them by new beliefs or institutions. Furthermore, some of these traditions may become valid again, naturally with the meanings pertinent to the new context. In fact, this may happen at times, as has been the case with other researchers in Wichí communities. We now understand that, thanks to the willingness of some Wichí, a large number of our topics of investigation are old secrets that they have decided to reveal.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to assess the relevance of secrecy as a tool used by human groups to define which knowledge is allowed and which is forbidden to the outsider, regarding social, cultural, and individual topics considered to be highly sensitive by the ethnic groups under study. Thus, we have confirmed the validity of our working hypothesis on the relevance of secret and secrecy, and have shown how these can contribute to anthropological knowledge.

Likewise, through our own experience we have noted how outsiders are perceived differently according to the type of relationship they manage to establish with the members of these ethnic groups. We have underlined that the three societies in question show variations in terms of their sociability - on the one hand, the Wichí prefer restricted exchange rules, while the Nivaclé and Chorote favour more balanced exchange rules.

[6] In any case, personal names fall within the sphere of secrecy (Barúa, 2001, p. 19).

These variations in the degree of sociability and, concurrently, of secrecy is what we have intended to illustrate when comparing the three above cases. While the Wichí prefer a higher degree of secrecy in addition to restricted exchange rules, the Nivaclé and Chorote evidence a link between their balanced exchange rules (Douglas, 1975, 1978; Siffredi, Barúa, 1987) and lesser embarrassment for intentional concealment.

Also, we have mentioned a possible combination of secrecy and openness. The male and female domains are in opposition to one another in terms of their own secrets, and the other gender is segregated through the concealment of their private matters.

Given the relevance of considering both the variability of historic, current, and local circumstances and the level of trust achieved between the researcher and his/her interlocutors, we have noted that, in the three cases under study, secrets are not unchanging since old secrets may no longer be unreachable; on the contrary, some practices and representations that were not forbidden may become so. On the other hand, what was freely communicated years ago may become buried under a cloak of secrecy, so that it is radically inaccessible to current knowledge and related changes.

As far as our fieldwork is concerned, we have underscored that it is critical to be careful in order to understand when we should or should not pretend "not to see" or "not to hear". Thus, guilt, either self-imposed or imposed by others, is often combined with "misunderstandings", with their and our goodwill, with trust-mistrust, with when and why they decide to lie and we decide to keep silent, with the credibility of liminal cases, and with what we interpret about them vis-à-vis what they think, which entails the risk of over-interpretation.

Finally, we are aware that the criteria selected for our analysis pose dilemmas that are typical of any anthropological task, to the extent that the communication challenges between us and Others are often exacerbated by the varying degrees of otherness and sociability.

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